Mountains Aflame: warning fires and watchmen in the Highlands, especially in the lands of the MacLeods

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Warning beacons and sentinel sites, where fires were kindled to signal the approach of hostile forces, are of particular interest to MacLeods. The arms of the Lewis branch of the kindred bear a mountain in flames, while the MacAskill family are known to have served the MacLeods of Dunvegan as 'shore watchers' responsible for the security of the seas to the south and west of the Isle of Skye.

In this article, building on important recent work in the field, I examine the evidence for the nature and operation of such sites in the Highlands, and for the watchers who tended them, before turning to warning beacons in the lands and traditions of the MacLeods.

Recently, medieval sentinel sites have lit up the scholarly landscape. In the past two years four articles, five research notes (short and extended) in the excellent little historical journal *West Highland Notes and Queries*, and a full edited volume (free to read online) arising out of an archaeological survey of Viking Age signalling have been published about the watch posts and warning beacons once perched on hilltops, promontories, and skerries across Scandinavia, Scotland, and beyond.[1] Particularly significant for those of us interested in Highland history is 'Watching the waters: Sentinel sites in the Inner Hebrides and western seaboard of Scotland' in the 2026 *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*.

[1] Ronald Black, 'Beacons', *West Highland Notes and Queries* [henceforth *WHNQ*], series 5, 15 (November, 2025), 39–42; Mary Braithwaite, 'Beacons', *WHNQ*, series 5, 15 (November, 2025), 37–9; eadem, 'Beacon fires', *WHNQ*, series 5, 16 (March, 2026), 48; Greg McEachron, 'Signal network controlling the Sound of Islay from Finlaggan', *WHNQ*, series 5, 16 (March, 2026), 1–5; Shane McLeod, 'Watching the waters: sentinel sites in the Inner Hebrides and western seaboard of Scotland', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquities of Scotland*, 154 (2026), 99–115; Markus Nilsen, 'Guardians of the fjords: fire beacons and local mobilisation in central Norway during the Viking Age and Middle Ages', *Medieval Archaeology*, 69 (2025), 140–68; Alexandra Sanmark and Shane McLeod, 'Norse navigation in the Northern Isles', *Journal of the North Atlantic*, 13 (2024), 1–26; Kees Slings, 'Beacons', *WHNQ*, series 5, 14 (July 2025), 37–8; Marie Ødegaard and Theo Gil, 'Lost in the records? The archaeology and cataloguing of beacons in Norwegian heritage database', *Primitive tider*, 27 (2025), 7–38; Marie Ødegaard, Stuart Brookes, and Thorsten Lemm (eds), *Beacons and Military Communication from Antiquity to the Early Modern Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2026); also John Baker and Stuart Brookes, *Beyond the Burghal Hidage: Anglo-Saxon Civil Defence in the Viking Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Ailig Peadar Morgan, 'Ethnonyms in the place-names of Scotland and the Border Counties of England' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of St Andrews, 2013), 118–19, 232–9, 241–2.

In this (open access) article, Dr Shane McLeod, a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute for Northern Studies, the University of the Highlands and Islands, reviews evidence for such sites in the southern Inner Hebrides and facing mainland. Given the paucity of relevant historical sources, Dr McLeod, drawing on what is known of the better-documented warning beacon systems of Orkney and Shetland, combines archaeological and place-name evidence with terrain and intervisibility analysis using Geographic Information System (GIS) data mapping. With these resources, he reconstructs networks of historic signalling sites along the Sound of Mull, the Firth of Lorne, and the Sound of Jura. Using fire by night and smoke by day, beacons enabled rapid long-distance communication to warn of imminent danger, allowing time for communities to flee, for warriors to muster, and for messengers to arrive with fuller and more detailed information about the nature and the direction of the encroaching threat. Dr McLeod moves beyond simple 'beacon spotting' to develop a persuasive account of a historic west Highland 'landscape of mobilisation'.

Temporary fires, whether for warning beacons or other purposes, are challenging for archaeologists to identify. Burnt wood or charcoal rarely allow for secure dating, especially since beacon sites may have been used and reused many times: not only as warning stations during periods of unrest, but also as aids for navigation; as signalling points at ferry crossings; and as venues for celebratory bonfires. Such fires might mark annual communal rites such as Beltane, St John's Eve or Midsummer Eve, and *Oidhche Shamhna* or Hallowe'en, as well as local festivities on the birth or coming of age of a chiefly heir, and wider national events such as British victories at Trafalgar or Waterloo. In the author's own memory, local fires were lit to celebrate royal jubilees and (however improbable it now seems) the 1992 Maastricht Treaty founding the European Union. Matters are complicated still further given that burnt wood was sometimes deliberately deposited in pits as boundary markers between estates.[2]

Place-names can offer firmer, though still incomplete, evidence. Dr McLeod begins his account with hill names containing elements derived from Old Norse *varðr* ('watch', 'beacon', 'guard': hence the many *Ward Hills* in Scotland) and *viti* ('signal', 'beacon').[3] As potential evidence for west Highland sentinel sites, he not only draws on Ordnance Survey maps and the (now digitised) place-name books in which toponyms were first recorded, but also on more fine-grained surveys drawing on local tradition. Place-names containing *teine* ('fire'), such as *Cnoc an Teine* ('hill of the fire'), offer evidence for potential beacon sites; those containing the more common elements *faire* ('guard', 'watch') and *aire* ('watching', 'attention'), such as *Cnoc na Faire* ('hill of the watch'), may indicate sentinel points from which approaching ships could be observed from afar.

[2] See for example Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (London, 1703), 114.
[3] McLeod, 'Watching the waters', 100–1.

The parish descriptions in the *Old* and *New Statistical Accounts* (*OSA*: 1791–1799; *NSA*: 1834–1845), mostly compiled by local clergy, show that popular tradition – no doubt influenced by contemporary antiquarians – took it for granted that beacon networks had at one time existed throughout Scotland, in the Lowlands and well as the Highlands, inland as well as on the coast. The ministers (who were, after all, responding to specific queries about 'local antiquities') associated local warning systems not so much with prominent hilltops as with the remains in their parishes of 'ancient duns' and 'Danish forts': watch towers, strongholds, and brochs.

> These towers have been probably intended, partly at least, for raising beacons or fires on them, to alarm the coast and country, on the approach of enemies. For this reason, the greatest care has been always taken to place them in a situation commanding a most extensive view, so as to be seen from the neighbouring towers and heights.[4]

To take a specific example, the Rev. Patrick Campbell, Kilninver and Kilmelfort, describes Dùn Mhic Raonuill on Minard Point at the entrance to Loch Feochan:

> There is also a watch tower or beacon, built upon a promontory stretching out into the Sound of Mull …

This small fortification may have formed part of a wider chain of beacons, perhaps directly linked to one of Dr McLeod's proposed sentinel sites, Cnoc na Faire on the island of Kerrera. But this remains inconclusive; as the minister observes:

> … the time and occasion of those erections have been lost in the mist of antiquity, and tradition is totally silent upon those circumstances, which could alone render the inquiry either amusing or useful.[5]

As well as recording individual potential beacon sites within their parish bounds, some contributors to the *Statistical Accounts* proposed entire signalling networks. The Rev.

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[4] Rev. Donald MacNicol, 'Lismore and Appin', *OSA*, i, 494. See also, for example, Rev. Archibald M^{c}Coll, 'Tiry', *OSA*, x, 401; Rev. Alexander M^{c}Farlane, 'Kilfinan', *OSA*, xiv, 256; Rev. John Macfarlane, 'Killbrandon and Killchattan', *OSA*, xiv, 168.

[5] Rev. Patrick Campbell, 'Kilninver and Kilmelfort', *OSA*, x, 321n.; also Rev. John Ferguson, 'Kilninver and Kilmelfort', *NSA*, vii, 68, heedless of his predecessor's reservations: 'It appears to have been intended as a beacon or watch tower, for the purpose of giving timeous warning of any hostile invasion. Similar towers are numerous along the coast, and were so situated, that with corresponding signals, well understood by those concerned, intelligence of the approach of an enemy by sea or land might be communicated some hundred miles in a few hours.'

Archibald Campbell of North Knapdale speculated that a beacon chain once extended up the west coast of Kintyre and the Sound of Jura:

> There are many monuments, of the remotest antiquity, which not only prove the martial spirit of our ancestors, but also, that they conducted operations with a method scarcely to be expected in these rude ages. For a tract of 150 miles, watch towers were erected in sight of each other. If an enemy landed, or if he was seen hovering in sight, in the course of two hours, the whole country was alarmed; and the inhabitants repaired to the shore, completely armed. The signal was to kindle a fire in each of these towers; and, as quick as lightening, all were illuminated, and all the country in motion.[6]

We know historically that during the 1615 rising of the MacDonalds in this area, the forces of Sir James MacDonald of Knockrinsay were twice able to evade attacks from hostile Campbells because of the warnings of fire beacons, lit on the island of Cara and the Oa of Islay retrospectively.[7]

Of course, suspected sentinel sites were not only confined to coastal areas. Contributors to the *Statistical Accounts* traced signalling chains up glens and straths into the Highland interior. George Gunn of Rhives, writing on the Sutherland broch 'Castle Cole' (*Caisteal na Coille*, 'the Castle of the Wood'), maintained that 'the remains of a line of watch-towers, to give warning of any hostile approach, may still be traced to the coast.'[8] Further north-west, the great glen of Strathnaver was described as the site of 'the principal chain of towers' within the extensive parish of Farr.[9]

Complementing the parish *Statistical Accounts* are the nineteenth-century Ordnance Survey place-name books, now digitised and searchable online on the Scotland's People website. The Royal Engineers responsible for the surveys were naturally interested in signalling and beacon systems: searches in the digitised texts for terms such as *fire*, *signal*, *beacon*, *gathering*, *warn*, and the like uncover a rich corpus of material to be analysed. The surveyors' notes accompanying the names preserve a great deal of oral tradition, sometimes supplementing the earlier *Statistical Accounts*, and in some cases explicitly drawing upon them.[10]

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[6] Rev. Archibald Campbell, 'North Knapdale', *OSA*, vi, 256.
[7] Rev. Angus MacDonald and Rev. Archibald MacDonald, *The Clan Donald (*3 vols, Inverness: Northern Publishing Co., 1896 – 1904), ii, 597–8.
[8] George Gunn, 'Clyne', *NSA*, xv, 154.
[9] Rev. David Mackenzie, 'Farr', *NSA*, xv, 66.
[10] See for example four traditional sentinel sites listed in the parish of Killean and Kilchenzie in Kintyre: OS1/2/13, 71, 72, 77, 83 (Dùn Putichantuy, Dùn Fhinn, Dùn Mhic Coigil, Port a' Chaisteil).

The Ordnance Survey place-name books, complemented by the work of modern place-name scholars, allow us to extend the range of Gaelic place-names that may plausibly be associated with beacon sites. They draw attention, for example, to terms such as *falaisg*, now used only of muirburn, but once, perhaps, referring more broadly to any conflagration. Other names contain *smùidean*, 'little smoke': hence *Cnoc an Smùidein* ('the hill of the little smoke') in Ardchattan was interpreted as the 'signal fire hill', while a similarly-named *cnoc* in Craignish was 'where bonfires are erected on any occasions of rejoicing'.[11] Again, there is *samhnach*, 'bonfire' (originally one lit on Hallowe'en or *Oidhche Shamhna*), an element contained in the headland name *Rubha na Samhnaiche* in Morvern; *Samhnag* in Kilmallie; and, in Ardnamurchan, *Creag Shoineach* ('bonfire rock') 'used in former times … on Midsummer and Hallow-eve as it commands a very extensive view up and down the glen and also of Argyllshire', and *Tobar Soineach* ('the well of the bonfire') 'at which in former times the Lads and Lasses of the district assembled on Halloween to carrouse [sic] and light Torches or Bonfires'.[12] The intriguing word *leus* refers to 'blaze, flame', 'glimmering light', or 'torch used in fishing at night'. Both island examples I have found seem to refer to fire signals, though in one case at least it is as a navigation aid rather than a warning beacon: *Geodha Leòis* ('the inlet of the fire') in Uig parish in Lewis, is '[a] small creek … which is good for small boats, although it is not much used.' The function of *Rubha Lias* (apparently 'the headland of fires') on the east side of the Isle of Barra is more obscure.[13]

Among sentinel points used, or re-used, comparatively recently is *Cnoc an Fhreiceadain* ('the hill of the guard/watch') in Badenoch:

> so called from the fact of its being occupied for a time by a detachment of *Am Freiceadan Dubh*, or Black Watch. … there is no summit in the Highlands so easy of access from which a more extensive view can be obtained than from the hill-top chosen by the old Black Watch as the eyrie from which to observe the movements of the rievers. … the sentinel on *Carn an Fhreiceadain* was apprised, either by smoke in the day or the beacon-fire during the night, of the approach of the rievers, and above to give the alarm…[14]

In addition to the element *freiceadan*, the place-name scholar Peadar Morgan draws our attention to place-names containing *sgrùdadh* ('scrutiny') and *coimhead* ('watch'), as well as some twenty names with *saighdear*, 'soldier', most of them 'applied to hill

[11] OS1/2/1, 8; OS1/2/3, 23; also OS1/2/68, 344.
[12] OS1/2/71, 128; OS1/2/68, 343; OS1/17/11, 4, 12, also 10.
[13] OS1/27/41, 91; Anke-Beate Stahl, 'Place-names of Barra in the Outer Hebrides' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1999), 246, 254.
[14] Alexander Macpherson, *Glimpses of Church and Social Life in the Highlands in Olden Times* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1893), 19–20. For more on *freiceadan* place-names, see Morgan, 'Ethnonyms', 233 fn.164.

entities or features', and of which '[i]t is reasonable to assume that some at least … refer to transit alarm points'. Morgan also makes a persuasive suggestion that some place-names containing the element *Gall* ('foreigner'), such as *Rubha nan Gall*, 'headland of the foreigner', may identify sentinel sites, albeit ones functioning as alarm relays rather than as points for direct observation of marauding outsiders.[15]

As well as serving as watch-posts and warning beacons, some sites also functioned as clan muster points. The best-known examples are those associated with the Grants of Strathspey:

> *Craig-Elachie*, 'Rock of Alarm.' There are rocks of the same name, one at each extremity of the country called Strathspey, about 30 miles distant. Upon the approach of an enemy, a signal was sent form the one to the other, for all fit to bear arms to appear at an appointed place. Hence the Grants motto, 'Stand fast Craig-Elachie.'[16]

The MacKenzies of Kintail had their own rallying place:

> *Tulloch-ard*, which commands a view of many of the Hebride islands. This mountain claims particular attention, on account of the veneration it was held in antient times. Like the temple of Janus, it indicated peace or war: the voice of hostility was sure to roar on its summit; for, when war commenced, a burning barrel of tar, on the highest ridge, was the signal; and all the vassals and tenants of Seaforth appeared next morning, armed *pro aris et focis*, at the castle of Donan, the usual place of rendezvous.[17]

The coats of arms of both clans feature a burning mountain as their crest. We shall return to this striking image shortly.

Let us turn to the MacLeod clan territories in the north-western Highlands and Islands: Lewis and the mainland opposite; its twin island of Harris; and the isles of Skye and Raasay. These lie beyond the region examined by Dr McLeod; the place-name evidence here is less secure, partly because Norse hill-names predominate, but also, perhaps, because the seascape is more open: there are few long, winding lochs and firths, or extended inland straths and glens, along which a network of signalling sites might readily be traced.

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[15] Morgan, 'Ethnonyms', 232–4; also 238–57, maps 24 and 26.
[16] Rev. Patrick Grant, 'Duthil and Rothiemurchus', *OSA*, iv, 316–17.
[17] Rev. Roderick Morison, 'Kintail', *OSA*, vi, 244.

Although place-name evidence is not so immediately apparent here as elsewhere in the Gàidhealtachd, local historical traditions certainly point to the existence of beacon networks. In his compendious *Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (1703), the Skye traveller Martin Martin (c. 1665–1718) writes of the remains of forts and brochs in his native island:

> ALL these forts stand upon eminences, and are so disposed, that there is not one of them, which is not in view of some other; and by this means when a Fire is made upon a Beacon, in any one Fort, it's in a few Moments after communicated to all the rest, and this hath been always observed upon sight of any number of foreign Vessels, or Boats approaching the Coast.[18]

It is intriguing that Martin seems to imply that watches were still being kept when he was compiling his account, at a time when the north-west of Scotland was a haunt of hostile French privateers lying in wait for heavily-laden East Indiamen returning by the long route around Great Britain rather than risking a hazardous passage through the English Channel.[19]

Martin's account of beacons in Harris, however, is situated firmly in the past:

> There are several Heaps of Stones, commonly called *Karnes*, on the tops of Hills, and rising Grounds on the Coast upon which they us'd to burn Heath, as a Signal of an approaching Enemy. There was always a Sentinel at each *Karne* to observe the Sea-coast; the Steward of the Isle made frequent Rounds to take notice of the Sentinels, and if he found any of them a sleep, he strip'd them of their Cloths, and deferred their Personal Punishments to the Proprietor of the Place.[20]

Nearly a century later, the Rev. John Macleod of Harris elaborated on Martin's report. Describing his parish in the *Old Statistical Account*, the minister discusses the local 'Danish forts':

> Two of them are always placed in sight of each other. They were used as signal towers as well as fortresses. The alarm of the first appearance of the invading foe, being almost instantaneously communicated to the whole country by means of a fire lighted in the tower from which the danger was first observed,

[18] Martin, *Description*, 153.
[19] In passing, maybe the long, narrow *Òban an Innseanaich*, 'the little inlet of the Indian' in the south of North Uist, refers to where an East Indiaman lay offshore: OS1/18/9, 82.
[20] Martin, *Description*, 35; see Martin's account of Orkney, 369, 388–9; and also 286, his description of how the men of St Kilda were able to signal by fire to the women at home that they were all safe after being stranded on a stack.

> and immediately repeated by the next in view, till the communication ran almost as quick as lightening, through the whole chain. For this purpose a centinel, called *Gokman*, was continually kept on the highest part of the wall, whose bussiness it was, on espying a fleet at sea, to light the fire, and the *gokman* on duty in the fort immediately communicating with this, instantly repeated the signal.[21]

Readers of Highland history will remember Martin Martin's mortifying encounter with the *gocaman* of MacNeil of Barra when trying to get access to Kisimul Castle:

> I saw the Officer call'd the *Cockman* and an old Cock he is: when I bid him ferry me over the Water to the Island, he told me that he was but an inferior Officer; his business being to attend in the Tower; but if (says he) the Constable, who then stood on the Wall, will give you access, I'll ferry you over. I desir'd him to procure me the Constable's Permission, and I would reward him; but having waited some hours for the Constable's Answer, and not receiving any, I was obliged to return without seeing this famous Fort.[22]

Given that the MacDonalds of Sleat were at this time actively seeking to claim the superiority of Barra, it is hardly surprising, whatever later excuses they may have given about fearing 'to expose it to the Conquest of a foreign Power', that the chief's *gocaman* and constable were reluctant to admit Martin to Kisimul: Martin's family were closely connected with MacDonald estate administration, and he himself worked for the clan chief.[23]

Further intriguing evidence concerning the *gocaman* is provided by the Rev. John Macpherson of Sleat (1713–65). As Macpherson served as minister of Barra between 1734 and 1742, this is probably another reference to the watchman of MacNeil:

> In times of war a centinel stood constantly on the battlements in a kind of century box; his business was to cry aloud at certain intervals, so as to convince the enemy without, that the fort was not to be taken by surprise. The Norwegians called this centinel *Gok-man*. He was obliged, by the rules of his office, to deliver all he had to communicate in extemporary rhymes. A large horn full of spirituous liquor stook always beside him to strengthen his voice and keep up his spirits.[24]

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[21] Rev. John Macleod, 'Harris', *OSA*, x, 375
[22] Martin, *Description*, 91.
[23] See National Library of Scotland, MS 1307, fos. 48, 202^{v}.
[24] Rev. John Macpherson, *Critical Dissertations On The Origin, Antiquities, Language, Government, Manners And Religion Of The Antient Caledonians* (London and Edinburgh, 1768), 324–5.

We might distinguish at least three different orders of sentry and coast-watcher. At the chief's castle, the *gocaman* could serve not only as an official watchman, but also as a messenger and spokesman, with ceremonial responsibilities that at times approached those a herald.[25] This aspect comes through clearly in the Rev. John Macpherson's account, as well as in an anonymous description recorded by the folklorist Alexander Carmichael (1832–1912) during an expedition to Barra and Mingulay in the summer of 1867:

> Ruary an tartair [the chief of the MacNeills] when at din[ner] always sent a man to the top of He-eveall who pro[nounced] with a trumpet Tha MacNeil Bharrai[dh] agus na bheil a dh-uais[lean] fo'n ghrein a sin aig an dinn[ear] [i.e. *MacNeill of Barra and all the nobles under the sun there are at their dinner*][26]

We may also note hereditary gentry families within clan territories who were charged with watching the shores. The MacAskill kindred of the headland of Rubha an Dùnain in south-west Skye appear to have acted not so much as *gocamain* than as *maoir-chladaich* for the MacLeods of Dunvegan: shore-stewards and coast watchers, with responsibility for monitoring a great swathe of sea to the south-west of Skye, from Uist and Barra across the Small Isles to the Rough Bounds of the mainland.[27] A tradition preserved in the Bannatyne Manuscript of MacLeod history underlines their importance to the clan:

> The Mackaskills were for several generations the Lieutenants of Macleod both by sea and land and had large possessions off the Macleods as Commanders of the Galleys or Birlinns and one of them always accompanied the Chief as his hau[n]ch man [*i.e. henchman*] clad in full armour and for a signal piece of service done by one of these haunch men a Chief of the Macleods decreed that whatever Mackaskill was buried a monumental stone having a warrior in full costume with the proper effigies of the Clan should cover their grave.

Significantly, the fort at the end of Rubha an Dùnain, guarding the entrance to the medieval boatyard associated with the MacAskills, is clearly visible from a traditional 'mirror site' on the north coast of the Isle of Eigg, as Alexander Carmichael recorded from James Robertson there:

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[25] The famous Barra storyteller John Macpherson (1876–1955), known as the Coddie, states that the *gocaman* was not only on sentry duty day and night, but was also a keen shot with the *gunna mòr*, the great gun of Castle Kisimul: Canna House Archives, CW33A/149 [Tobar an Dualchais track 22573]; John Lorne Campbell (ed.), *Tales from Barra told by the Coddie* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1992 [1959]), 44–6.
[26] Edinburgh University Library, Carmichael Watson MS 114 fo.58^{v}.
[27] Colin Martin and Paula Martin, 'Rubha an Dùnain: a multi-period maritime landscape on the Isle of Skye, Inner Hebrides, Scotland', *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology*, 47 (2018), 141–2.

> There is a Dunan Thalamh Sgeir on Rubh' an Dunain on Skye and Dunan Thalamh Sgeir on the Island of Eigg. One can be seen from the other, and when a fire is seen on one, the other could respond. There was always a watchman on the dun day and night, and if he fell asleep, he had to die, death by hanging. The baillie had to ensure that the watchman did not fall asleep or doze; and that watchman was called the Gocaman, after the wee bird that follows the cuckoo.[28]

A key point here is that not only were the two sentinel sites understood as complementary to one another, but they were both associated with sheltered harbourages nearby from which ships might be sent out to investigate and intercept suspected hostile vessels.

As well as the gentry shore-watchers, more local responsibilities seem to have rested with families such as the MacGillivrays in Aird, Sleat, charged by MacDonald of Sleat with keeping watch for the district. Their name in Gaelic is locally understood as *MacGilleBhràigh*, 'the son of the servant of the brae or slope', rather than the usual *MacGilleBhrath*, often interpreted as 'the son of the servant of judgement'. Above Aird stand the twin hills of *Cnoc an Teine Mòr* and *Cnoc an Teine Beag*, the large and small 'hills of fire'.[29] The exacting duties of these sharp-eyed watchers may have stirred the envy of their fellow tenants, if they were exempt, at least in part, from labouring the land or fighting in the field.

At least one place-name appears to preserve *gocaman*: *Àirigh Ghocman* ('the *gocaman*'s shieling'), a possible watch-site above the pre-Reformation Augustinian nunnery at *Teampall na Trianaid* (Trinity Temple) in Càirinis, North Uist. It may be possible to identify further examples if we allow for a related form *gocaire*, from **goc-fhear*, 'goc-man'. Some place-names now taken to contain *còcaire*, 'cook', may in fact be later misinterpretations of this older term.

On the north side of Gesto Bay on the west coast of Skye, the headland called *An Còcaire* ('the cook') may conceal an earlier *An Gocaire*, 'the watchman'. This interpretation may gain support from name of the rock 'adjacent to the shore' below,

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[28] Camille Dressler, *Eigg: The Story of an Island* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2024 [1998]), 4; Martin and Martin, 'Rubha an Dùnain', 143–6, 154–6. The reciter is probably James Robertson (1819–1910), Cleadale, Eigg, who was himself born in Skye, in Tarskavaig, Sleat. The *gocaman* or *gocan cuthaig* ('the cuckoo's servant/herald') usually refers to the meadow pipit, tirelessly attending the voracious outsize intruder who has displaced its own brood. It was also used humorously of human equivalents, for example a small boy hanging around his older brother, or a diminutive husband beside a larger wife. In Tiree, *gocan* is used to describe 'a perky little fellow': John Gregorson Campbell, ed. Ronald Black, *The Gaelic Otherworld* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2006), 94.

[29] My thanks to Angela NicGilleBhràigh for information about the traditions of the family, whose descendants still live in Aird today. If the two hills were used together, at least three different messages could be sent depending on how the beacons were fired.

Clach a' Chruinneachaidh ('the stone of the gathering'). The headland is now a popular tourist viewpoint. At the opposite end of the country lies *Eilean a' Chòcaire* ('the island of the cook') in inland Loch Eck in Cowal, Argyllshire. An artificial crannog positioned at a bend in the long, narrow loch, it commands open views both southwards and to the north-west, and may once have been a key node in a signal network linking the Campbell strongholds of Dunoon and Inveraray.[30] Finally, *Meall a' Chòcaire* (ostensibly 'the lumpy hill of the cook') in Badenoch lies directly across from *Cnoc an Fhreiceadain*, 'the hill of the watch' noted earlier, and also above *An Suidhe*, 'the sitting place'.

As already noted, heraldry provides further, perhaps unexpected evidence for warning beacons in Highland history. Especially striking is the coat of arms of the MacLeods of Lewis, first attested in the great mid-fifteenth-century heraldic compendium, the Armorial de Berry, where the chief's shield of gold is charged with a great blue mountain in flames. The same blazing mountain was subsequently assumed as a heraldic device by families claiming kinship with, and indeed legal heirship to, the dispossessed MacLeods of Lewis: the MacLeods of Raasay, the MacKenzie Earls of Cromartie, and the descendant kindred of the MacLeods of Colbecks.[31]

Sir George MacKenzie, first Earl of Cromartie (1630–1714), explained the blazing mountain as alluding to a service that the King of Norway laid upon Harald, father of Leod, the progenitor of his MacLeod ancestors:

> at a certain tyme of the yeir to keip tuo fyred beacons, on[e] in Lewes, ane other in the Ille of Sky, for directing the Norvegian shippes in ther navigationes of thes coasts … From this obligation of the fyrie beacons, Harald and his successors caryed in ther sheild a burneing hill in a feild azure …[32]

If the emblem of the flaming mountain really does reach back to Viking times, it may originally have belonged to the Nicolsons, the once dominant kindred from whom the

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[30] Note, however, that the manuscript map Pont 14 in the National Library of Scotland, compiled by the Rev. Timothy Pont at the end of the sixteenth century, names the site as 'Ylennachochyrr', seemingly still 'the island of the cook'.

[31] See Charles I. Fraser of Reelig, 'Some notes on the heraldry of the MacLeods', in I. F. Grant, *The MacLeods: The History of a Clan* (Edinburgh: Spurbooks, 1981 [1959]), 631–7; Dr Alex C. McLeod and Ruairidh H. MacLeod, 'The heraldry of Clan MacLeod', *Clan MacLeod Magazine* (1982), 6–10; John MacLeod, 'MacLeod heraldry', *Clan MacLeod Magazine* (1945), 347–8; *Clan MacLeod Magazine* (1946), 388–90; Stuart MacLeod, 'Notes on MacLeod arms', *Clan MacLeod Magazine* (1947), 408–10. Also J. Storer Clouston, 'The Armorial de Berry (Scottish Section)', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries in Scotland*, 72 (1938), plate VI; Robert Riddle Stoddart, Scottish Arms: being a Collection of Armorial Bearings, A.D. 1370–1678 (Edinburgh: W. Paterson, 1881), plates 3, 23, 37.

[32] William Fraser, *The Earls of Cromartie* (2 vols, Edinburgh: Thomas and Archibald Constable, 1876), ii, 510–11.

MacLeods later took over their territories.[33] Aubrey Halford-MacLeod has plausibly suggested that the image may in fact refer to an wider network of beacons across the northern Minch basin.[34] As well as their heraldic device, two early forms of the Lowland Scots motto of the MacLeods of Lewis seem to allude to beacons. The Workman Manuscript, compiled about 1566, we gives 'I birn q[uhil] I se' ('I burn while I see'); the Sunderland Hall Manuscript, from around 1590, has 'I ruke quhil I se', presumably meaning 'I smoke [reek] while I see', although the reading is not entirely certain. Since beacons burned by night and smoked by day, these mottoes surely imply warnings raised on the sighting of enemies, rather than simple navigational markers. I should admit, however, to a lingering suspicion that the beacon image may in fact rest primarily on a Gaelic pun: *MacLeòid Leòdhais* (MacLeod of Lewis) set against *MacLeòid leòis* ('MacLeod of [a] beacon'), an instance of the heraldic wordplay known as canting arms.

Beacon use in Lewis is historically attested in August 1653. After Colonel Ralph Cobbett arrived at the island with several Cromwellian war frigates in a show of force against the royalist MacKenzies of Seaforth, 'the "Redshanks" fired their beacons, and fled with their cattle and arms to the hills.'[35] The warning system may have included the chain of promontory forts extending up the north-east coast of Lewis noted in the archaeological survey of the fort of Dùn Èistean at the island's northern extremity.[36]

On one level, warning beacons may be regarded as part of a wider non-verbal signalling system in Highland culture, designed to convey messages. Among other such means can be noted the *crann-tàraidh* or fiery cross, the classic means of summoning clansmen in time of danger, and bagpipe music, especially *pìobaireachd* associated in oral tradition with warnings for those who could grasp the words implied by their rhythms. Less warlike and closer to our own time is the *peursa*: a signal pole topped with a piece of sacking used to summon villagers for road-mending, or, when marked with seaweed, to indicate that the valuable fertiliser had been washed ashore. There were also conch shells used to call township meetings; and the poignant smoke ascending from a burning straw mattress, announcing a death in the village.[37]

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[33] W. David H. Sellar and Alasdair Maclean, *The Highland Clan MacNeacail (MacNicol): A History of the Nicolsons of Scorrybreac* (Lusta: Maclean Press, 1999), 3–11; Ronald Black, '1467 MS: The Nicolsons', *West Highland Notes and Queries*, series 4, 7 (July 2018), 3–18.

[34] Aubrey Halford-MacLeod, 'The MacLeods of Lewis … and of Assynt, Coigach and Gairloch', 199–200.

[35] Willicam Cook Mackenzie, *History of the Outer Hebrides* (Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1903), 350. Mackenzie's footnote shows he is quoting from a letter by one of Cobbett's officers printed in the contemporary newsbook *Mercurius Politicus*.

[36] The tower formerly standing on Dùn Èistean may have served as a beacon site, whether as a warning signal or as a navigational aid directing ships towards the entrance of a portage that avoided the rough seas around the Butt of Lewis: Rachel C. Barrowman (ed.), *Dùn Èistean, Ness: The Excavation of a Clan Stronghold* (Stornoway: Acair, 2015), 83, 191–209, 350, 419–23.

[37] For the *peursa*, see University of Edinburgh, School of Scottish Studies SA1967/135 (John MacDonald, Caolas Phaibeil, North Uist); SA1972/49/A6 (Angus MacKenzie, Hòigearraidh, North Uist); SA1977/195/A5–B1 (John MacIsaac, Baile Raghnaill, North Uist); SA1984/116 (Donald MacDougall,

The first devastating Viking raid on the monastery of Lindisfarne in 798 was said to have been foreshadowed by 'dire forewarnings': 'violent whirlwinds, and lightnings; and fiery dragons [*fyrene dracan*] were seen flying in the air'. In a sense, these were otherworldly warning beacons, ominous portents of the signal fires that would be lit again and again in future years to signal the approach of the dreaded Viking raiders. In Gaelic tradition, the death of a notable figure was thought to be presaged by a meteor or *dreag*, a word probably derived from Old Irish *draic* or *draig*, the term for a fire-breathing dragon. And in our own day, we find the *solas-bàis*, the death-light, the harbinger of a deadly accident, especially the drowning of a fisherman.[38]

Having considered place-names, local descriptions, folklore, and heraldry, we will finish with classical Gaelic poetry, with the work of a woman poet. In her moving late fifteenth-century lament for her husband, Niall Òg MacSuibhne of Castle Sween, Aithbhreac inghean Coirceadail describes him as 'dreagan Leódhuis na learg ngeal', 'the dragon of Lewis of the bright slopes'.[39] The poetic image of the fire-breathing serpent on a shining hillside surely points to a recognised association of Lewis, and its ruling clan, with a mountain in flame.

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Màlacleit, North Uist). Straw mattress: SA1977/49/B1–3 (Christina and Màiri MacKay, Gèirinis, South Uist).

[38] See, for example, Robert Craig Maclagan, 'Ghost lights of the west Highlands', *Folklore*, 8 (1897), 203–56.

[39] Joseph J. Flahive, 'A hero's lament: Aithbhreac inghean Coirceadail's Lament for Niall Óg mac Néill', *Scottish Studies*, 35 (2010), 106–19; William J. Watson (ed.), *Scottish Verse from the Book of the Dean of Lismore* (Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd for the Scottish Gaelic Texts Society, 1937), 60–1.